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ABSTRACT

The advent of many new technologies to make access to education and open learning more and more possible requires parallel developments in instruction to support and serve the student better. There are three aspects of student support: pre-enrollment, tutorial services, and counseling and advising services. However, the developments in technology intruding in the Open Learning arena transform the nature and form of these mediation services. A central concern throughout the learning process must remain the learner, and in Open Learning students must be carefully prepared for the independence they will acquire. Though technology is a vital link, many new formats require end-user hardware not likely to be available in the average home for several years. While Open Learning provides opportunity for a mass audience, it often involves the student learning in isolation as an independent learner. Use of extensive technology requires carefully developed and thoroughly evaluated standard systems designed in line with sound instructional principles. While the benefits of educational technology are accepted, it is noted that the new learning is rarely individualized, and the subject matter and sequencing of study are likely to be almost entirely controlled by the institution providing the technology. It is argued, therefore, that these changing relationships, together with issues of access to the appropriate technology, have the potential to create a new form of disadvantaged student. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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OPEN LEARNING AND STUDENT SUPPORT - A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP

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OPEN LEARNING AND STUDENT SUPPORT - A CHANGING RELATIONSHIP

Allan Doring

Student support in any learning process is acknowledged as crucial. One form of that support is access, not only to teaching staff but also to learning resources. This paper explores the effect of educational technology developments on the student's learning with the emergent potential to create a new form of disadvantaged student.

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, Johnson acclaimed that *Australian society is changing. Open Learning is an educational approach required to cope with these changes in the provision of education.* In providing increased opportunity and access, Open Learning has offered a variety of means to enable students to attain their particular educational goals. Within that opportunity, student support remains a critical factor in the success of the educational process.

However, in the current climate of change and development, it appears that Open Learning is at risk of becoming more and more a platform associated with developments in educational technology. Unfortunately, while developments in audio, video and computer applications may provide the means to enrich student's learning experiences, such changes in delivery have implications. For example, the student is more likely to be left alone and isolated; their learning is more likely to be under the control of technocrats driven by technology innovation rather than instructional principles.

In examining such changes, Dillon et. al. (1992:29) suggest that one important means of analysing the effectiveness of the teaching-learning relationship is through an analysis of the student support system. They note that while both support systems and learning materials contribute to the "process" of a course, support systems developed in recognition of student need help the student become more competent and self-confident in learning, social interactions and self-evaluation.

This paper focuses on implications in terms of student support where new forms need to

be evolved especially if the relationship between curriculum and development is too skewed towards the technology. As Stewart (1992) noted, new educational technology requires careful analysis of requirements and functions which raises the issue of educational technology being both the ends and the means of learning for the student. The use and access to educational technology remains reliant on the reliable functioning and each student's degree of comfort and understanding of the technology, all prior to the desired learning occurring.

STUDENT SUPPORT IN OPEN LEARNING

Wright (1994:59) identified three aspects of student support: pre-enrolment, tutorial services and counselling and advising services. Experience indicates that such support as academic content assistance, personal encouragement and individualised pacing, can be an important factor in reducing student attrition, increase completion rates and student satisfaction.

According to Garrison and Baynton (Dillon, et.al. 1992:29), the learner support system comprises both resources the learner can access in order to carry out the learning process and resources which relate to the mediation of the communication process. The resources of the learning process includes the availability of and access to courses, teachers or facilitators, learning materials, library facilities, media equipment and community experts.

One view is that the objective of student support services is normally construed as the individualising of the academic offering to the student. It is often the case that those involved in student support are identified as intermediaries between the course material and the students themselves. In terms of educational technology, the challenge for the future lies in the area of student support services, the mediation role.

With developments in educational technology now intruding into the Open Learning arena, the nature and form of this mediation role is being transformed. With access to audio, video, audio-graphics and computer developments, the student has access to a different

form of interaction together with a wider variety of resources as mentioned.

STUDENT SUPPORT AND TECHNOLOGY

As suggested earlier, a central concern throughout the learning process must remain the learner. It is clear that there are three areas where technology-based learning can offer substantial benefits:

* to help modernise course delivery, improve quality, and enrich students' teaching and learning experiences;

* to provide highly effective ways of dealing with increasing student numbers and higher student:staff ratios by releasing staff time;

* to enable students' learning to be organised on a more flexible basis.

Stewart, (1993:13)

There is no contradiction in arguing that technology-based instruction is a powerful tool for Open Learning, partly to compliment traditional approaches, but also to support the learning and teaching processes in a new way.

Open Learning allows students to utilise resources, thus providing an alternative means of accessing courses in a more individual style. The effectiveness of the approach seems to depend very much on providing a ***mix*** of different methods which suits the individual learner. Such methods encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. But a key point is that it is essential that students are carefully prepared for that independence. Many are unsure how to handle the amount of freedom they are given in higher education, a problem possibly accented when high order technology is part of the learning process.

TECHNOLOGY - A CRITICAL LINK ?

There does appear an assumption that educational technology is the most appropriate means of meeting student support needs. It is argued that more needs to be done systematically to identify methods which are particularly promising for specific instructional purposes or teaching areas in which maximum advantage could be drawn from the use of technology. Although these initiatives will allow experience to be gained in technology-based instruction, and some high quality materials and imaginative uses are being identified, overall development and application will remain patchy and uncoordinated. On the basis of these activities, it is still difficult to demonstrate the benefits of technology in a totally convincing way, and yet the potential seems clear.

In a climate of diminishing resources, institutions are being "forced" to encourage cost effective teaching with the underlying message that educational technology being touted as one means of achieving cost-effective education (whatever that really is). Educational technology is not necessarily the cheapest but at the same time providers need to ensure that students engage actively in the learning process. Of course, open learning encourages this flexible approach.

I agree with Gooley and Towers (1993) who note that interactive electronic technologies can contribute to the quality of education for all learners. But systems are expensive and not usually cost effective for individuals to access, providers to establish multiple sites, or economically viable for rural and remote areas. Apart from large upfront capital costs and ongoing communications and staffing costs, there is a prudent requirement to set aside considerable recurrent funds for maintaining and upgrading hardware and software. Without due care in the planning to link teaching and learning, it is possible that institutions have spend considerable sums on communications technologies without first considering application or compatibility. By way of contrast, Prebble, (1993:151) while [referring to NZ and interactive learning systems] makes the point that most of the more sophisticated media becoming available would require end-user hardware not likely to be available in the average home for a few years yet.

A pertinent comment is offered by Meachem (1993:231) when he notes that geographical limitations translate into educational deprivation, as it is the poor who are most unlikely to own or have access to the means of program reception as for the geographical or single student. It is inappropriate to assume that all learners have access to technologies including physical proximity.

This point is extended by focusing on coherent groups of students in urban centres that have some provision for local support, rather than isolated individuals in rural areas. Of course, the whole issue of technological excesses can be better understood if the question of fitness of purpose for whose, or what purpose, is critically examined.

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES

There is little doubt that technologies can and will play a major and increasing role in the provision of higher education opportunities in the future, but they are not in themselves cure-alls, and they do not come without their own price. While Open Learning has the opportunity to take learning into new environments, over reliance on some forms of technology removes one aspect of higher education, the interaction, the debate, the dialogue and the challenge between teacher-student, and student-student. Part of the inherent tension is that open learning while providing opportunity for a mass audience, often involves the student learning in isolation as an independent learner rather than an interactive one. Such a position accepts only one form of learning.

Educational questions are especially urgent because there is little accumulated knowledge to draw on. Walker (1992) suggests that educational technology has a poor history in terms of its ability to critically reflect on its education assumptions. Evaluation studies have tended to concentrate on attempts to refine a narrow range of input and output measures but often these results are difficult to locate. Stewart (1992) argued that although the limitations of traditional teaching methods have been thoroughly investigated, there is still insufficient evidence available to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of the more recent advances made in educational technology.

There is a real risk that educational technology may serve to keep the developers and providers in business but keep shifting the goalposts for students who may be required to access and develop a level of competence and comfort prior to commencing their learning. While a number of promising innovations are being developed, as demonstrated at the 1994 CAUT National Teaching Workshop, their effectiveness in learning is yet to be clearly established.

The point needs to be made that any extensive use of technology will require the establishment of carefully developed and thoroughly evaluated standard systems designed in line with sound instructional principles and in the light of current knowledge about student learning (Stewart, 1992). As development proceeds, this point needs to be kept in mind if the technology is to assist learning, not just provide another means of presenting content. It is essential that the technology add something, not just be an interesting alternative.

ISSUES IN STUDENT SUPPORT

By its very nature, educational technology attracts particular concerns. One is the question of equipment compatibility between individual students and the teaching source. Others include the problems of access to equipment, learning to use the communication and conferencing software, encouraging students to be active participants in discussion, handling overload, reliability of equipment, access to technology by those who do not own and 'help-type facilities given that these students have other commitments.

There is a need to examine the potential and actual contributions of educational technology to teaching and learning in open learning. The separate treatment of these methods of instruction is justified by current expectations that computer-based teaching and learning will help providers to cope with increased numbers of students rather than quality of learning - an economic rationalist position. While there is a long history of enthusiastic promotion of the benefits of technology in education, for example, broadcasts, there also seems a growing optimism about the potentialities of an emerging generation of technology which integrates sound and video in multimedia presentations and in

communication between learners and teachers.

What cannot be avoided is the understanding that developing technology affects the relationship between the provider and the students. While print and broadcast are directed to the individual students, interactive media tends to extend the traditional classroom environment. Without doubt, the rapid diversification of interactive telecommunications has brought group instruction into the forefront of open learning. The effect is to shift control over the time, place, and pace of study back to the institution, and to add to the educational experience an opportunity for student-student interaction and some degree of spontaneity. Developments such as e-mail and voice-mail have allowed the student to regain some control over time, place and pace as well as other students thus encouraging interaction but also adding an extra-curricular dimension and new opportunities to their learning.

Certainly such shifts through technology has empowered the student in a different way with the possibility of becoming a real part of the community of scholars. These evolving relationships, affected by technology, require that we rethink and make explicit our relationships with students. The next generation of educational technology is likely to empower students even more to be autonomous scholars, thus greatly changing what might be called the traditional teaching-learning relationship.

SUMMARY

In returning to the central thesis of this paper, the term support as influenced by technology needs to be critically examined, a point made by Dawkins (1988:52) in his reference to technology developments, when he referred to supporting technologies. Likewise, Catchpole (1993) identified the need for greater structure and support for the learner as they need help to cope with technology. Likewise it can be argued that technology-based instruction is a powerful tool for education providers, partly to compliment traditional approaches, but also to support the learning and teaching processes in a new way.

A similar point is made by Braun and Hudson (1993), when they suggest that while some technology, for example, video-conferencing, is time-dependent and place-dependent, such technology can supplement other material. But even so, whatever the technology, what level of study support is afforded ? As Healy (1992) so aptly noted, *while computer communications are very, very useful, everyone has to have a computer, otherwise you are stuffed.*

While the benefits of educational technology are claimed, the new learning is rarely individualised, the subject matter and sequencing of study is likely to be almost entirely controlled by the institution who provides the technology. In conclusion, it is argued that these changing relationships, together with the issue of access to the appropriate technology, have the potential to create a new form of disadvantaged student.

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